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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO CARTAGENA HIGHLIGHTS THE RICHNESS OF
U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONS

REF: BOGOTA 3375; BOGOTA 3521; BOGOTA 3593

SUMMARY

¶1. The Ambassador traveled to Cartagena on December 4-5 to inaugurate the 13th Houston Series conference, visit two USAID projects, meet with landmine survivors, and attend a luncheon hosted by AmCham Cartagena. The Ambassador's visit to Cartagena was widely covered by the press and highlighted the richness of the U.S.-Colombia bilateral relationship, focusing on the importance of democratic institutions, USG assistance to Colombia's most vulnerable groups, and the benefits of expanding business and investment opportunities between the two countries. END SUMMARY.

HOUSTON SERIES -- MESSAGE OF PROGRESS

¶2. On December 4-5, the Ambassador delivered welcoming remarks and a keynote address at the Houston Series, an annual conference hosted by the U.S. Embassy that brings together Colombia's leading decision-makers to debate the country's most pressing issues. The conference was widely covered by the press and included panels on democracy in Latin America; media and information in a democracy; opposition and governance in Colombia; political parties and political reform; autonomy of the legislative, judicial and executive branches; and democracy in the Andean region. The Ambassador commented on the conference's transition since its beginning in 1998 from urgent themes of peace and security to this year's focus on institutionalization and democracy, noting the significant progress that has been made. He further discussed the importance of examining the lessons that can be learned from Colombia and how they can be applied elsewhere, a precursor to his December 16 speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) touching on the same theme.

¶3. With a focus on highlighting USG assistance to Colombia's vulnerable populations, the Ambassador met with a group of demobilized combatants who participate in the GOC's reintegration program. The group consisted of eight former members of the National Liberation Army (ELN), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) who receive market-based business and job skills training from a local Colombian organization, COMFAMILIAR Cartagena. The participants spoke about their reintegration process and presented personal stories of developing small businesses from a butcher shop to a fast food enterprise. In response to the Ambassador's request for their recommendations on improving the reintegration process, the participants suggested additional support for university scholarships. USAID through its implementer, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), has contributed \$124,600 USD to the project.

¶4. Ambassador visited a nutritional recuperation center (NINEMA) in one of Cartagena's poorest neighborhoods. Since April 2008, USAID/Food for Peace (FPP), through the World Food Program (WFP),

has contributed foodstuffs worth approximately \$30,000 USD to support the center's activities. Press covered the Ambassador's visit to NINEMA and the Ambassador participated in a press gaggle at the conclusion of his tour of the center.

¶5. Ambassador met with five landmine survivors from Colombia, and the U.S. Expert Level Delegation attending the Cartagena Summit on a Mine Free World, highlighting the USG's commitment to tackle all aspects of the landmine problem in Colombia. USAID, through Mercy Corps, funded the participation of 14 landmine survivors in the summit and leadership workshops. During the meeting one survivor stressed the importance of targeting assistance and support through larger vulnerable communities to avoid further stigmatization of the survivors.

EXPANDING INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES: REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

¶6. The U.S. Commercial Service and AmCham Cartagena collaborated to host the Ambassador for a luncheon. During his keynote speech, the Ambassador stressed the growth of business and investment opportunities between the U.S. and Colombia, and provided examples of Colombian companies' expansion into the U.S. and growing U.S. investment in Colombia. The Ambassador struck an optimistic tone for business and investment opportunities going forward, and emphasized the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility in building a better Colombia. He pushed back at criticism by some in the private sector that the U.S. had abandoned Colombia in its dispute with Venezuela. The Ambassador then presented an award from Commercial Service Bogota and AmCham Cartagena to International Supply as the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) of the Year for its uncompromising commitment to "Buy American".

POSITIVE PRESS COVERAGE

17. PRESS COVERAGE: Ambassador Brownfield's visit to Cartagena received extensive local and national print and broadcast coverage. As the visit timed with the Colombian Supreme Court ruling on the Arango Baci case (Reftel), most national coverage focused on the Ambassador's answers to questions related to this topic. Several local publications and broadcasts covered the visit to USAID project NINEMA and the meeting with landmine survivors. El Herald, Barranquilla's Liberal Party oriented leading daily (readership 357,900) featured the visit to NINEMA in the print and online edition.

BROWNFIELD